

SS. Peter & Paul Russian Orthodox Church  
St. Paul  
St. Paul Island  
Pribilof Islands  
Alaska

HABS NO. AK-51

HABS  
AK,  
1-5APA,  
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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

ADDENDUM  
FOLLOWS.

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
SS. PETER AND PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

HABS No. AK-51

HABS  
AK,  
1-SAPA,  
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Location: St. Paul, St. Paul Island, Pribilof Islands, Alaska.

Present Owner: Alaska Diocese, Orthodox Church in America.

Present Occupant: SS. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church.

Present Use: Church.

Significance: This 1905 church is the oldest building on the island of St. Paul. The church's separate elements -- sanctuary, nave, narthex, vestibule, and belltower -- are clearly expressed on the exterior in a harmonious composition, and the interior features an elaborate mahogany iconostas. In contrast to their housing, which was supplied by the government, the church was commissioned by the natives, and remains an important expression of Russian-influenced Aleut culture.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1905-06. On September 8, 1903, Fr. John Orloff, then priest at St. Paul's, notified Fr. Alexander Kedrofsky in Unalaska that he had arranged for the construction of a new church with the agent of the North American Commercial Company, the private concern that then had exclusive sealing rights on the Pribilof Islands.<sup>1</sup> In 1904, the belltower of the old church was taken down, probably because it posed a hazard.<sup>2</sup> The architectural drawings for the new church were noted as approved by Bishop Tikhon on March 28, 1905. On June 5, 1905, four carpenters from San Francisco arrived on St. Paul "to build a church."<sup>3</sup> On October 10, the church was completed and painted.<sup>4</sup> That winter, though, the church was still described as "unfinished," although the community used it for Christmas and Easter services.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Alaskan Russian Church Archives, St. Paul file, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>2</sup> September 30 and October 3, 1904, Log of Treasury Agent, St. Paul, Pribilof Islands Collection, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (on microfilm).

<sup>3</sup> June 5, 1905, Log of Treasury Agent.

<sup>4</sup> October 10, 1905, Log of Treasury Agent.

<sup>5</sup> W. C. Allis, resident agent, North American Commercial Company, to the North American Ecclesiastical Consistory, December 16, 1905, and April 6, 1906, Alaskan Russian Church Archives.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 2)

2. Architect: Nathaniel Blaisdell. The drawings are signed "N. Blaisdell Architect, 222 Sansome St., S.F. [San Francisco]." After apprenticing with architect Clinton Day, Nathaniel Blaisdell established his own practice in San Francisco in 1898. According to city directories, he maintained his own architectural firm for about thirty years. By 1930, he was no longer listed as an architect.
3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: The contractors were four carpenters from San Francisco, hired by the North American Commercial Company. Local men undoubtedly helped in the construction. Building supplies were shipped in from San Francisco.
4. Original plans and construction: The sophisticated design of this church originally exhibited a neoclassical influence, with corner pilasters, cornice returns on the gable ends, and entablatures over every opening. Each element of the building that is expressed on the exterior -- nave, sanctuary, narthex, and vestibule -- has a gable roof, each at a different height, but each with the same pitch. The square belltower, rising to a three-story height, has a stylized, open ironwork onion dome, set on a pedimented roof.

The original drawings show that the church was built much as designed. In the drawings, the stairway is located on the south side of the entrance vestibule; during construction it was located on the north side. Some materials were reused from the previous church; the drawings note "clock as at present," but it is not certain a clock was ever installed.

On the interior, the iconostas originally had a different painting scheme than at present, with additional moldings picked out in gold. The balustrade-like construction above the iconostas was not there, nor was the construction over the Royal Doors to hold the icon of the Last Supper. There were no light bulbs between the modillions. The wide board floor had both striped and floral carpeting. (See Early Views, III.B.1., below.)

5. Alterations and additions: There apparently was a fire in the church in the 1930s. Charring is found on some timbers in the roof, and the Fisheries general manager recalled: "A fire in the present church in the early thirties . . . was extinguished after it had destroyed some very old icons and many church records."<sup>6</sup>

The greatest alteration occurred in the early 1980s when cement asbestos shingles were applied to the exterior and much of the ornament was removed. At that time, entablatures over the windows, the space for the clock on the belltower, intricate brackets at the belltower cornice, and a flat architrave on the rear of the

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<sup>6</sup> General Manager, Pribilof Islands, to Chief, Bureau of Alaska Fisheries, August 20, 1952; correspondence in collection of IRA Tribal Council.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 3)

sanctuary were removed. A small one-story shed-roofed addition to the north side of the narthex probably also dates from that time. Louvers in the second-level opening of the belltower were replaced with glass at an unknown date.

On the interior, the sheetrock ceiling in the sanctuary was replaced by plyboard. The swinging doors between the nave and vestibule were removed in the late 1970s, as they made too much noise and resulted in collisions.<sup>7</sup>

B. Previous Churches on the Site:

A report to Bishop Innocent from the early 1840s gives this account:

The Russian people began to settle on St. Paul Island in 1810. They had no means of constructing a temple. Finally Russian Ignatii Cherkashenin, who died in 1822, and Creole Kassian Shayashnikov built the church, without assistance from the Company, in 1821. Since that time Shayashnikov has continued to take care of the church as church warden.<sup>8</sup>

Fr. Innocent (Veniaminov) described the chapel in 1838:

In the village of to-day (1838) there is a wooden chapel in honor of the apostles Peter and Paul, erected in 1821, and nicely ornamented in the interior, at the expense of the resident Aleuts; . . . built . . . of neatly-dressed drift logs.<sup>9</sup>

This chapel, pictured in an 1843 drawing by Voznesenskii, was sketched thirty years later by Henry W. Elliott, who visited the islands on behalf of the Smithsonian. His drawing, dated October 22, 1872, and captioned in part "the old Russian church," shows the village cove, village, and the three separate hip roofs of the church. A photograph of this church shows a log structure, composed of several elements. The square-plan nave has a two-story section in the middle, topped with a pyramidal roof. A semi-octagonal sanctuary on one end has a polygonal roof, while at the other end the narthex appears to be one-and-a-half stories, square in plan with a pyramidal roof. Each of these three elements has a small onion dome. (See Early Views, III.B.3., below.)

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<sup>7</sup> Lavrenty Stepetin, Warden, interview, July 11, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Report of Priest Gregory Golovin to Bishop Innokenty, no date, but response dated September 26, 1844, Documents Relative to the History of Alaska, 1:292.

<sup>9</sup> Bishop Innocent Veniaminov, "Zapiska ob Ostrovah Oonahlashkenskaho Otdayla," (St. Petersburg, 1840), translated by Elliott and appearing in Henry W. Elliott, The Seal Islands of Alaska (1880), reprinted in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1898) 3:241.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 4)

This chapel was replaced in 1873-75. On May 28, 1873, two San Francisco carpenters named Mossman and Davidson were brought to St. Paul by the Alaska Commercial Company "to frame and build a church for the natives." The natives paid for the materials and furnished part of the labor. At the end of the summer of '73, when the carpenters left, the church had been "raised and boarded and will be completed before another year."<sup>10</sup> Progress was made in 1874: "the church advanced as far as the material on the island permitted";<sup>11</sup> the onion domes were covered with canvas and painted, and Mossman decorated the belltower with ornamental woodwork.<sup>12</sup> In 1875, the church was painted, and on May 26, 1875, the new priest arrived: Fr. Paul Shisnekoff, an Aleut who had lived on St. Paul, and who was the brother of Rev. Innocent Shisenekoff (also spelled Shaiashnikoff), archpriest of Unalaska.<sup>13</sup>

A contemporary view is provided by Libby Beaman, who spent the winter of 1879-80 on St. Paul:

A large Greek Orthodox church . . . was erected by the natives in '75 . . . . The natives gave the entire sum -- twenty thousand dollars -- for its construction out of their earnings from the Alaska Commercial Company, which hires them to do the actual sealing. The church boasts a clock in its onion-domed tower and a full set of chimes, which can be heard above the raucous cries of the birds, the constant roar of the seals, and the boom of the surf. The chimes sound very beautiful across the bleak wastes when one is out clambering over the rocky ledges and dunes of the island.<sup>14</sup>

Photographs of this 1875 church show a building with many of the same elements of the previous chapel, but with much more architectural sophistication: it had a hip-roofed, square-plan nave with a hip-roofed sanctuary and a narthex, from which rose a square belltower with clock. There were three onion domes, each perched on a drum; there were pediments over the windows and paired brackets at the eaves. The photograph of the interior shows the same iconostas and doors, with the same icons, that appear in the present church. Above the iconostas was a space about 2' high, through which the ceiling of the sanctuary was visible. On the wall above the iconostas, five paintings were hung, as in the present church. The amvon, too, was similar, with three steps and a curve in the center, and with the same balusters. (See Early Views, III.B.2., below)

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Bryant, Treasury Agent for Seal Islands, to Hon. Wm. A. Richardson, Secretary of the Treasury, September 30, 1873, and December 4, 1873, in "Reports on Condition of Seal Life on the Pribilof Islands by Special Treasury Agents in Charge, and Others, from 1868 to 1895," in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska (Washington: GPO, 1898), 1:44 and 1:50.

<sup>11</sup> Bryant to Hon. B. H. Bristow, Secretary of the Treasury, May 12, 1875, 1:73.

<sup>12</sup> September 1 and 13, 1874, Log of Treasury Agent.

<sup>13</sup> Bryant to Bristow, May 28, 1875, 1:78; May 26, 1875, Log of Treasury Agent.

<sup>14</sup> Betty John, Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879-80 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989), 122.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 5)

The Alaska Commercial Company billed the church for materials and labor, and its accounting was as follows:<sup>15</sup>

Lumber	2,545.29	
Nails	69.03	
Paints, Oils, Brushes, & Gold	323.45	
Bricks, Lime & Cement	112.55	
Hardware, Locks, Iron &c.	61.63	
Duck	82.20	
Tar paper	52.00	
Altar Doors & Picture Frames	556.00	
Furniture	431.25	
Bells	2,750.00	
Clock	749.82	
Chandelier	413.75	
Curtains, Carpet, Silk &c.	1,256.92	
Pictures from Russia	900.00	
		10,303.94
Freight	1,105.05	
Labor	3,371.50	
		4,476.55
Interest on expense from May 31, 1873, to August 1, 1875, \$4,120.77 @ 9%		370.87
		15,151.36
Add - Cost of Parsonage		928.42
		16,079.78

The churches in the Pribilofs were unusual because they were self-sustaining. Pribilof Aleuts were financially well off, compared to those on the Aleutian Chain, and they devoted a portion of their wealth to the church. In an arrangement closely supervised by the U.S. government, which leased exclusive sealing rights to the Alaska Commercial Company from 1870 to 1890, the Company paid the natives 40 cents per seal skin and provided rent-free housing, schooling, medical care, fuel, oil, and salmon. The natives divided their sealing money "among the laborers according to their standing as workmen,"<sup>16</sup> and gave two first-class shares to the church. When priests were assigned to the islands, they too received sealing shares. Beginning in 1827, the priest in Unalaska visited the islands once every year or two. In 1875, though, just as the new church was completed, St. Paul received its first resident priest, who was entirely supported by the community.

<sup>15</sup> "Abstract of Statement of Cost of Church" [1881], Alaska Russian Church Archives.

<sup>16</sup> Elliott, 1890, 3:436.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 6)

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Each part of this gable-roofed church reads as a separate element on the exterior: nave, sanctuary, narthex, belltower, vestibule. Although the exterior has been stripped of much of its detail, the interior is elaborate.
2. Condition of fabric: good.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: The church measures 28'-6" x 71'-10" overall. The exterior measurement for each element is: vestibule, 13'-5" x 8'-1"; narthex, 21'-2" x 12'-8"; nave, 28'-6" x 34'-7"; and sanctuary 21'-5" x 16'-6".
2. Foundations: The building is set on pilings.
3. Walls: The walls are clad in cement asbestos shingles, with corner pilasters, except for the shed-roofed addition, which is covered with clapboards. The building is white with dark green trim.
4. Structural system, framing: Light wood framing.
5. Stoops: There is a two-step plank stoop on three sides of the vestibule.
6. Chimneys: A stovepipe rises from the shed-roofed addition.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: There are doors on three sides of the vestibule; all are plain metal, set in plain surrounds. The front door is a double door and is surmounted by a fanlight which has been boarded over; it is set in a molded surround with a keystone. Elaborate transom windows over the two side doors have been closed off, but are visible on the interior.
  - b. Windows: The windows in the nave are large, with four-over-four-light double-hung sash, set in molded surrounds. The windows in the narthex also have four-over-four lights, but are smaller. In the sanctuary, the original windows have been replaced with six-over-six-light windows with a boarded-over area below them. The belltower has smaller, windows, one-over-one-light sash on the north side and four-over-four on the south. The window in the shed-roofed addition has six-over-six lights.
8. Roof:

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 7)

- a. Shape, covering: All of the roofs are gable, covered with wood shingles painted green.
- b. Cornice, eaves: There is a molded cornice, which returns on the gable ends. On the vestibule, the cornice extends to form a pediment over the main door.
- c. Belltower: The square (13'-9" x 13'-6") belltower rises from the roof of the narthex and is topped by a pyramidal roof with pediments. This is surmounted by an ironwork ornament reminiscent of an onion dome, and topped by a cross.

C. Description of Interior:

1. Floor plans: Each element of the church -- the vestibule, narthex, nave, and sanctuary -- is an open room, except for the narthex which has closets and stairways. In the nave, the amvon, raised three steps, has a semi-circular projection in the center, and a krilos at each end. On the second floor, there is a choir loft in the nave in a semi-hexagonal plan.
2. Stairways: The stairway is a three-quarter turn on the north side of the belltower. The walls are horizontal beaded boards with a vertical board wainscot, and the ceiling is beaded boards.
3. Flooring: The floors are covered with wall-to-wall carpeting.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are horizontal beaded boards, painted blue. Below a molded chair rail is the wainscot of vertical boards, beveled on both edges, and a tall molded baseboard; all are painted white. At the top of the wall, there is a molded cornice with fascia board, and the ceiling is beaded boards, all painted white.
5. Doorways and doors: The doorway between the nave and the narthex is wide enough for double doors, but these have been removed; there is a three-light transom window. The doorway between the narthex and the vestibule has double doors, with one large panel over two. In the narthex, small doors to closets are plain, set in molded surrounds.
6. Decorative features: The iconostas across the east end of the nave is divided into seven bays. The screen has fluted, engaged Corinthian columns set on paneled bases. Above the molded cornice the wall is horizontal boards, surmounted by another cornice, which has modillions alternating with light bulbs, and which supports a balustrade-like element. Behind this is the wall, with four large icons in gold frames. The iconostas is mahogany, painted white with gold trim, except for the royal doors and the deacons' doors, which are varnished wood with gold trim.



SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 8)

The royal doors have lattice work and a sunburst motif in the transom light.

The amvon has similarly elaborate balustrades and screens. The choir loft has turned balusters.

There is a dome visible from the nave, but it does not project above the roof on the exterior. The dome is octagonal, with panels of horizontal beaded boards.

7. Bells: The nine bells in the second level of the belltower are marked "CAST BY WILLIAM BLAKE & CO. FORMERLY H. N. HOOPER & CO. BOSTON MASS A.D. 1875."
8. Mechanical equipment: The building is equipped with electricity. The heat is diesel oil-fired forced-air.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The church sits on the side of a hill in the middle of town. The front of the church faces northwest, but for simplicity in this report, it has been treated as if it faced west, with its sanctuary on the east.
2. Historic landscape design: The churchyard is enclosed with a picket fence and contains several graves, including the shrine at the site of the previous church. A larger cemetery is located on a facing hillside, across town.
3. Priest's House: Built in 1929, the priest's house is wood frame with vertical wood siding recently applied. The one-and-a-half-story house has a jerkinhead roof.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Original architectural drawings:

Blueprints of the original drawings are located in the Public Works Department of the City of St. Paul. They are titled "Sketches for the Proposed Russian Church To Be Erected on St. Paul Island, N. Blaisdell Architect, 222 Sansome St., S.F." There is a handwritten note in Russian: "28 March 1905, This plan for building the church on St. Paul Island is approved. Bishop Tikhon." The blueprints include a plan, west elevation, north elevation, and a section.

The Public Works Department also has blueprints of drawings for a church on St. Paul Island that were never used. The drawings are undated, but a 1932 Russian-language newspaper was rolled up with them. The drawings are signed by "Theodore Ponomareff, San Francisco," and they show an extremely elaborate church with a tent roof and a basement auditorium.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 9)

B. Early Views:

1. Present church

Photograph of present church before siding was applied and ornament removed, C. L. Andrews Collection, PCA 45-282, Alaska Historical Library, Juneau.

Photograph of present church, as above, ca. 1915, Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

2. 1873-75 Church

Photographs of north and south sides and the interior, 1880s, Gray and Hereford Collection, PCA 185-9, -10, and -11, Alaska Historical Library, Juneau.

Photograph of west front and south side, 1888, Summer of Thetis Collection, PCA 27-7, Alaska Historical Library, Juneau.

Photograph of north side and west front, 1891, 22-FFA-350, National Archives and Records Service, Washington, DC.

Photograph of south and east sides, ca. 1897, Charles S. Hamlin Collection, 728-26L, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks.

3. Ca. 1821 Church

Drawing of St. Paul, 1843, by I. G. Voznesenskii, 1142-19, Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, Academy of Sciences, Leningrad, USSR. Reproduced in E. E. Blomkvist, "A Russian Scientific Expedition to California and Alaska, 1839-1849: The Drawings of I. G. Voznesenskii," trans. Basil Dmystryshyn and E.A.P. Crownhart-Vaughan, Oregon Historical Quarterly 73 (June 1972): 128, and in James R. Gibson, Imperial Russia in Frontier America: The Changing Geography of Supply of Russian America, 1784-1867 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 21.

Watercolor of St. Paul, October 22, 1872, by Henry W. Elliott, in Report Upon the Condition... cited below, plate 30.

Photograph of church, no date, 1905.121--STER, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Reproduced in Fern A. Wallace, The Flame of the Candle: A Pictorial History of Russian Orthodox Churches in Alaska (Chilliwack, B.C.: SS. Kyril and Method Society, 1974), plate 44.

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 10)

C. Interviews:

Lavrenty Stepetin, warden, interviewed by author, July 11, 1989.

D. Bibliography:

Alaskan Russian Church Archives, St. Paul file, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Correspondence in collection of the IRA Tribal Council, located in the basement of the tavern. Box 34 includes an August 20, 1952, memorandum from the General Manager of the Pribilof Islands to the Chief, Bureau of Alaska Fisheries, in which he outlines the history of the church in St. Paul.

Elliott, Henry W. The Seal Islands of Alaska (1880), in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1898. 3:1-285.

Elliott, Henry W. Report Upon the Condition of the Fur-Seal Rookeries of the Pribilof Islands of Alaska (1890), in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1898. 3:315-538.

Faulkner, Sandra McDermott. "National Register Nomination: The Seal Islands." National Park Service, 1986. St. Paul and St. George have been declared a National Historic Landmark, and the complete file is the History Division, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

John, Betty. Libby: The Alaskan Diaries and Letters of Libby Beaman, 1879-80. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1989.

Pribilof Islands Collection, Log of the Treasury Agent, St. Paul, Archives, University of Alaska Fairbanks (on microfilm).

Reports on Condition of Seal Life on the Pribilof Islands by Special Treasury Agents in Charge, and Others, from 1868 to 1895, in Seal and Salmon Fisheries and General Resources of Alaska. Washington: GPO, 1898. Volume I.

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

Documentation of SS. Peter and Paul Russian Orthodox Church was undertaken by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER), a division of the National Park Service, the state of Alaska and the Icon Preservation Task Force. The project was executed under the general direction of Robert J. Kapsch, chief of HABS/HAER, and Boyd Evison, Alaska Regional Director, National Park Service. Recording was carried out during the

SS. PETER AND PAUL  
RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
HABS No. AK-51 (Page 11)

summers of 1989 and 1990 by Steven M. Peterson, project director; Raymond Todd, Andrew Feinberg, Lidiya Velichko (USSR), Alex Lashkevich (USSR), Kate Solovjova (USSR), and James Creech, architectural technicians; John Lowe III, photographer; and Alison K. Hoagland, historian, who prepared this report.

SS. PETER AND PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Saint Paul Island, Pribilof Islands  
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ADDENDUM TO  
SS. PETER AND PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Saint Paul  
Saint Paul Island  
Pribilof Islands  
Alaska

XEROGRAPHIC COPIES OF COLOR TRANSPARENCIES

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20013

ADDENDUM TO:  
SAINTS PETER AND PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Russian-American Architecture  
St. Paul Island, Pribilof Islands  
St. Paul  
Aleutian Islands  
Alaska

HABS No. AK-51

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240

ADDENDUM TO:  
SAINTS PETER & PAUL RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH  
Russian-American Architecture  
Church Street  
Saint Paul  
Saint Paul Island District  
Alaska

HABS No. AK-51  
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PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C St. NW  
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